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More U.S. military personnel have taken their own lives so far in 2009 than have been killed in either the Afghanistan or Iraq wars this year, according to a Congressional Quarterly compilation of the latest statistics from the armed services.

As of Tuesday, at least 334 members of the military services have committed suicide in 2009, compared with 297 killed in Afghanistan and 144 who died in Iraq, the figures show.

Lawmakers in recent years have been increasingly concerned about the growing problem of military suicides, especially in the Army. They have been holding hearings, passing bills and approving billions of dollars more than requested to improve mental health care for military personnel and veterans.

But even those who have been most intensely focused on the

issue said they found the new numbers alarming. So far in 2009, the Army has had 211 of the 334 suicides, while the Navy had 47, the Air Force had 34 and the Marine Corps (active duty only) had 42.

“These numbers are just staggering and, tragically, are an indication that we are simply not doing the job of providing adequate mental health care for both our active-duty service people and our veterans,” said Bob Filner, D-Calif., chairman of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee.

Armed forces personnel traditionally have had a much lower suicide rate than the population at large. Because the most recently available national suicide statistics from the Centers for Disease Control are from 2006, it is impossible to know whether the current military rate is higher than the current civilian rate. However, the civilian suicide rate for males ages 20-29 hovered around 20 per 100,000 during the first half of this decade. The Army said its suicide rate is now a bit higher than that for the first time.

Moreover, the total number who have killed themselves in 2009 is probably higher than 334, because the figure does not include unavailable suicide statistics for 2009 for Marine Corps reservists or veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who have left the service.

The veterans’ numbers, in particular, could yet swell the totals considerably. The Department of Veterans Affairs said an average of 53 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans committed suicide each year between 2002 and 2006. And that number only includes suicides among the quarter of all veterans who use the VA’s health system.

The Deployment Connection

The rising number of suicides has coincided with U.S. military forces redeploying frequently to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Army leaders say they are unable to conclude that the deployments are the main cause of the suicide increase — one-third of the active-duty soldiers who killed themselves in 2009 have no deployment history, according to Army Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Chiarelli.

But many senior members of Congress say they believe there is a connection.

Filner wants to hold hearings soon, saying they would show that the number of casualties in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars is much higher than officially acknowledged once psychological wounds are accounted for.

John P. Murtha, D-Pa., chairman of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee and a Marine Corps veteran of Vietnam, attributes the rising mental health problems to a lack of time at home between deployments.

"I'm shocked to hear there's more suicides than people lost in Afghanistan," he said, attributing the upward trend to "the stress of a long war where people just don't have the opportunity to come home to get healed."

The Army, which accounts for the bulk of the suicides, is taking an aggressive approach to preventing them, through periodic screening and education to get help to those who need it, Chiarelli said at a Nov. 17 press briefing.

"Everyone is distressed at this extremely high rate," said Gene Taylor, D-Miss., a senior member of House Armed Services. "About the only good thing is that Gen. Chiarelli has focused his efforts on it."

Congress is aware of the problem and has taken steps to address it, noted Daniel K. Akaka, D-Hawaii, chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee and a senior member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"In the past two years, Congress passed sweeping legislation to address veterans' mental health issues — from a far reaching omnibus bill to raise VA mental health standards to a suicide prevention hotline," he said.

The newly enacted fiscal 2010 defense authorization law (PL 111-84), for example, requires significant increases in mental-health providers in all the military services. Chiarelli said the Army needs hundreds more mental-health and substance-abuse counselors than it has.

Filner, meanwhile, has drafted legislation that would require the secretaries of Defense and Veterans Affairs to set up a pilot program to help servicemembers reintegrate in society after they return home from deployments. The program would mandate psychological evaluations and screenings for brain trauma and provide for follow-up care.

Filner is convinced the process of questioning military personnel is not thorough enough and that too much of a stigma is still attached to honestly speaking about emotional problems.

General Population Comparisons

While the gross numbers are of concern, they do not tell the story so much as the rate of increase when compared with suicide rates in the overall population.

The Army and Marine Corps rates used to be lower than the comparable civilian rate. For example, it was 9 per 100,000 among those who had served on active duty in the Army in 2001. But in 2008, by comparison, the Army suicide rate among those who had served on active duty was 20.2 per 100,000 people.

Similarly, the active-duty Marine Corps rate in 2008 was 19.5 per 100,000 or just shy of the most recent civilian rate statistics available. It had been much less of a problem just a few years ago, going as low as 12.5 per 100,000 in 2002, Marine Corps figures show.

The suicide problem is expected to become more prominent as the debate continues over deployments in Afghanistan. As the public grows more restive about continued warfare on two fronts, lawmakers will be under pressure to address those concerns, and the political pressure will grow as next year's midterm elections get closer.

The deployments to Afghanistan will probably only grow in the months ahead. President Obama is expected to announce next week that the U.S. force of about 68,000 in Afghanistan will swell next year, perhaps by 50 percent. Meanwhile, the approximately 115,000 U.S. forces in Iraq will go down to 50,000, but not until August 2010.